American Slavery and Its Repercussions

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It has been accurately stated by an anonymous source, “The institution of chattel slavery is truly the worst chapter in American political history. Not only did the institution stand in stark contradiction to the professed ideals of freedom and equality, but its legacy extended well beyond the formal abolition of slavery with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. The enduring repercussions of the institution of slavery and the white supremacist ideologies that supported it constituted a relentless assault on black people’s dignity.” This essay will analyze the impact of slavery and its notorious legacy on ideals of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ through the respective works of Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass, and James Baldwin. I will also lend my commentary support and contentions with each of these individuals as it is my position that slavery is an abomination; and more specifically, the United Sates’ history of chattel slavery has created serious concern for the concept of ‘justice.’

The onset of African chattel slavery in America began in the early Seventeenth Century as the Dutch began their slave trade in the colonies. The numbers of enslaved African people brought to America exponentially grew through the mid Nineteenth Century. It was not until after the U.S. Civil War that slavery was legally condemned throughout the nation via the U.S. Constitution’s Thirteenth Amendment which was ratified in 1865. Prior

to this ratification, slavery was only considered illegal in various regions of the Northern states, and even there slaves were continually counted on national censuses as “slaves” until slavery was declared nationally illegal. This would suggest that although slavery was one of the key issues fought over in the U.S. Civil War, it was not so urgent for the country, or even the North, to treat the enslaved as being equal to ordinary citizens until after the victory of the Union over the Confederacy. Even after defeating the slave-entrenched Confederacy, it was not until 1965 that Blacks would get full equal rights to Whites under the law.

From the origin of the United States of America, the author of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the U.S., Thomas Jefferson, openly publicized in written word and voice that slavery was wrong and that he was against its very existence. In 1769, as a member of the Virginian Congress, he had a bill to end slavery in Virginia, but it was denied (Jefferson, 9). The unbeknownst issue for Jefferson was that he did not believe in ‘manumission,’ that is the immediate freeing of slaves by their owners, and not many abolitionists in America believed in this immediacy other than Benjamin Lay and few others. Jefferson believed in gradually transitioning slaves from enslavement to free-society through education and a sort of genetic weeding-out over time separating the naturally bright from the doltish (Jefferson, 243-244).

In part, the reason that Jefferson was hesitant to free slaves through immediate judicial means was that, culturally, chattel slavery was the norm

for over one hundred years in America prior to Jefferson. His view of government and regulating society was to incorporate as peaceful of means necessary by gaining the democratic vote of the Colonies and then the American people as a whole. Additionally, Thomas Jefferson held an Aristotelian philosophical concept of a natural hierarchy and specifically the idea of 'Natural Slavery,' being that some people are born to be slaves by their very nature. In the meantime, before any division could have been made, Jefferson felt that having slaves was a benefit to both the slave and the slave owner because enslavement benefited the slaves as being housed, clothed, and fed, etc.; while the slave benefited the slave owner by performing all work necessary for the slave owner's survival and thriving. Unfortunately, this was a view that many Americans held in Jefferson's day (Jefferson, 243-244).

Beyond simply thinking that people are naturally born leaders or slaves, Jefferson thought certain races of people, e.g. Blacks and Native Americans, were mentally inferior to that of Whites. He also thought the only way Blacks would become equal to Whites was if they mixed with Whites having mulatto children. This was not because of some hatred for others, rather he believed there was empirical evidence for this idea. His racism towards Blacks was established through empirical evidence only by strict guidelines of social norms which had well-established slavery that also precluded education for these slaves. This means that Jefferson's so-called evidence for the inferiority of black people was not determined by practical

scientific methods, rather it was misguided understanding of the exasperating transgenerational enslavement of Blacks. Any mental inferiority held by black slaves of Jefferson's period was due to their situation and not their skin color or any correlation of such (Jefferson, 238-241).

Although Jefferson advocated for the abolition of slaves through democratic processes while maintaining the conflicting view of 'Natural Slavery,' he also possessed slaves of his own from the age of 21 until his passing in 1826, at age 83. Since his slaves were considered his property, he had the option of what should happen to them once he died via his will, e.g. free them or give them to someone else. Jefferson chose to give them away to others as a means to pay off some of his growing debt, rather than giving these enslaved people their freedom. Just as America's history of slave ownership, Jefferson's slave owning is often a point of conflict for those that love Jefferson and those that oppose him.

I disagree with Jefferson's gradual transition for the enslaved people on the grounds that he considered it an endangerment to Blacks as being mentally inferior to that of Whites and that it would be more harm for them than good. I do not think that someone is inferior or superior because of their skin color. I also do not think it is the place of a government to concern itself with what it determines as being best for individuals, such as when or how to free slaves. Slavery should exist under no circumstances as it is the natural inclination of being a person that provides the need to be

free. An enslaved person is under the arbitrary will of another and this prevents their truly living and flourishing. Not only does slavery hurt the enslaved, but it equally hurts those that enslave because it makes the enslaver think of themselves as superior to another while cutting off sympathy to others. Simply put, it makes the slave owner less human as it makes the enslaved less human. It is my position that people are to live freely in society among others, and we have ‘negative duties’ towards others such as not hurting, not killing, not stealing, not enslaving, etc. Frederick Douglass thought the same.

Frederick Douglass was a slave for most of his life being traded from one slave master to another. He constantly felt that no matter how well his slave masters treated him, he was still not treated as being a human. His Liberty and freedom grew to be of most importance to him. In one relationship of slave and slave master, Douglass said that the woman of the house he worked for first treated him as one human should treat another human. As time went on, it became clear that the absolute power she was given over Douglass had corrupted her own integrity of treating others as fellow human beings, especially when it came to Douglass. In this example, it is empirically clear that slavery harms both the enslaved and the enslavers, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Further examples provided by Frederick Douglass was that some masters treated him less poorly than others; I will not say, “They treated him better than others,” because after all he was still not free and was

treated as being a lesser creature than his white slave masters and White society as a whole. For instance, when he was growing up on a plantation, the slave master would give him cakes and speak kindly to him (Douglass, 16). Yet another slave master would allow Douglass to go work elsewhere for money, but he had to give the entire earnings to the slave master at the end of every week. Sometimes this master would give Douglass some of the earnings back. Douglass thought that all of the money should be his own since it was earned through his own labor. These examples demonstrate that even when given some taste of kindness or freedom, he was still not treated as being owner over himself or his labor (Douglass, 59).

It is not clear in Douglass' words as to whether he felt the same towards government and taxation. It is my speculation that he would think that a government should tax as little as possible in order to operate, but in the end every person's income is justifiably their own. In order for 'justice' to exist, there requires a unilateral system of equal treatment under the law, so anarchy would not be applicable for 'justice' to exist. Either small amounts of taxation would be required, or a voluntary system would be necessary. It is more likely that small amounts of taxation would be successful, and it is my understanding from Douglass' situation with the master that took his money that he would be inclined to agree with this sentiment for a Minarchist, or "Night-Watchman," state.

Douglass' father was unknown to Frederick, but it is speculated that his father was his mother's white slave master who would have also been

his slave master for a short period of his life (Douglass, 2). This could potentially provide some credit to Jefferson's argument that Blacks have more mental capacity once mixed with Whites, but it is highly unlikely. Most presumably, Douglass saw the world in a different way than many other slaves did at the time which provided him the ability to grow as a person. He learned to read and hungered for knowledge by playing games with white children nearby (Douglass, 22-23). He rightfully understood that a person has property within themselves and is responsible for their actions and labor (Douglass, 59). Furthermore, he saw that people are to be treated equally under the law as the concept of 'justice' would have it, no matter one's skin color or mental capacity.

Frederick Douglass, in contrast with Thomas Jefferson, saw that immediately releasing slaves was imperative. Where Jefferson saw Black people as being naturally inferior, Douglass was able to refute such a hasty generalization and distasteful claim by proving over and over again of his humanity and intellect, while establishing his equality to Whites. Douglass like Jefferson, for the most part, believed in peace; and his solution to being enslaved was to run away from the slave owners rather than leading acts of violence towards those that enslaved him and others. Until his death in 1895, at age 77, Frederick Douglas continued to advocate for the equality of Blacks to Whites, and condemned the practice of slavery. He lived to see the victory of the Union over the Confederacy, the Emancipation, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. If only he could have

seen the progress made around 70 years later through the likes of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin.

James Baldwin was one of the leading speakers during the Civil Rights movement for equal rights of Blacks in America. Although he eventually moved to France, he continued to travel to the U.S. to speak about race issues. He lived a life of segregation as being black, a convert to the Nation of Islam, and as being a homosexual. France became a refuge for him in between speaking and writing on the Black struggles faced in America. He pushed the ideas of 'Civil Rights,' 'Affirmative Action,' and 'Social Justice.'

It was often Baldwin's criticism that no matter the increase of success stories in the U.S. for black people, he felt that because of the origins, establishments of the former enslavement, and segregation of blacks, it was not possible to have equality. Retribution was never given by the U.S. after the freeing of slaves, and this was a sign of a lack of justice in the system that bore him. Baldwin held a deeply seeded skepticism of people and thought it best to trust no one other than his own experiences (Baldwin, 8). This skepticism was most likely a symptom of Baldwin's life experiences growing up in a racist society that treated him as being lesser of a human being than Whites for his being black. The sad thing is that this was a common thought among Blacks in the U.S. of Baldwin's day. It was difficult to see the successes that even he had accomplished, and to be grateful for his growth as a person, due to the origins of his ancestry and their poor

treatment. Beyond just his ancestors' treatment as slaves, Baldwin had to live a life of mistreatment and often with a lack of 'justice.'

As Frederick Douglass' story pointed out the struggles of actually being a slave and becoming a self-made success, Baldwin's story shows the backlash of the American system through an ongoing struggle with resentment as Baldwin's lack of being treated as an equal to Whites. It had been around 70 years since Douglass had passed and Baldwin was still seeing the repercussions of slavery and the mistreatment of Blacks in America, especially in the Southern states. This racism in America had become extensively held conviction for most of the nation, and the culture was not shifting quickly enough for Baldwin and most Blacks at that time. Baldwin's solution to the problem was to not run away completely, although he did move away to France, his solution was to write and speak out against the racist system, and society itself, and join the Civil Rights Movement in pursuit of 'social justice' and Affirmative Action.

A tenet of the Civil Rights Movement was that even forcing society with the coercion of the state was a step in the direction of ending racism and the mistreatment of Blacks in the U.S. Of course the Civil Rights Movement was also fighting against the legally systematic racism such as that of Jim Crow laws of the South which enforced segregation at public facilities and transportation. These laws chanted the idea of "separate but equal." In contrast, Baldwin was in pursuit of 'together and equal.'

Baldwin’s circle of influential people included Elijah Mohammad of the Nation of Islam. Unlike Elijah Mohammad, Baldwin rejected the idea that Whites were inferior to that of Blacks, and did not see them as being “devils” (Baldwin, 76). Baldwin also did not agree with continued segregation of Whites and Blacks in America, as he saw they are equals. Baldwin’s primary concern was to shape society’s view that Blacks and Whites are equal and should be treated as equals, both in society and by the state. His idea was to “free” white people from the delusion that Whites are superior, and this was the necessary step for ensuring Blacks’ equality and “freedom” from racism. His means of accomplishing this “freedom” were by writing, speaking, and pushing the judicial agenda of the Civil Rights Movement.

It is clear to see the frustration that most black people had in America during Baldwin’s time. They were forced to pay taxes and were still treated as being lesser in a society that treated Blacks as if they were not welcome. Many White businesses did not serve them, whether that be banks, restaurants, retail stores, etc. Everywhere they turned, they were harassed or their rights violated. These violated rights did not just occur within free society, they also occurred in the judicial system where ‘equality under the law’ and ‘justice’ were atypical for Blacks in America. Most Blacks, and people of color, thought the only solution was to force a systematic change in order to gain true equality.

From Thomas Jefferson to Frederick Douglass there were drastic changes made within the state to free the enslaved via the Thirteenth Amendment, grant equal citizenship for Blacks via the Fourteenth Amendment, and enforcing equal voting rights for black men via the Fifteenth Amendment. The fumbling of not ending slavery from the beginning of the U.S. by Jefferson and the Framers of the Constitution led to further victimization and a broken justice system for all. To abrogate the rights of one individual or group is to abrogate the rights of all, as 'justice' is the equality of treatment under the law. The continuation of slavery in America reinforced racism in society and the state, while holding back the growth of those enslaved and the enslavers themselves. From the unbalanced foundation of the U.S. system, inequality and its repercussions were well established. Racism was then destined to take hold as it was then backed by the coercive clutches of government. Even with added Amendments, new laws to get around those were created and enforced. This is the difficulty of a democratic system which tyrannizes the minority by the vote of the majority, and racist laws are a prime example. The benefit of a democracy is that within it people tend to attempt, at least, to correct what was wrong although it can be a rather slow process.

From Frederick Douglass to James Baldwin, prior to the Civil Rights Act, it does not appear there were many positive changes in the U.S. government system. In fact, racism and inequality persisted throughout both the South and North. This is another example of the dawdling of a

democracy. Even after the Civil Rights Movement, racism towards Blacks continued and still exists today. The hesitations and reluctance of Thomas Jefferson are echoed throughout U.S. history until the days of James Baldwin. The repercussions of slavery and systematic racism are ongoing.

My position on slavery is that people are never born to be slaves. This is to say that I do not support the philosophical ideology of Aristotle on this particular matter. I do think that people, in general, have genetic predispositions for certain levels of mental capacities. Just as twin brothers can be born in the same family, with the same socioeconomic class, same education, etc. and they can have different outcomes, skills, and abilities than one another. In part, because they are individuals that can decide what to pursue, and because there is evidence of their innate differences. These differences do not comfort the notion that one brother may or should enslave the other because of any hierarchical claims. One's intelligence level is only compared to others'.

A system of 'justice' requires that all people be treated equally under the law, and the determinant of who is and who is not a 'person' is not the position of a government. Once there is room for subjectivity in law, the once balanced scales of 'justice' are disproportioned. From Jefferson's 'antiquation' of law, or refusing to pass laws required to end slavery, led to 'dispensation' which is to say the system only allowed particular instances of 'justice.' From the time of Frederick Douglass, Amendments were added, but 'subrogation' was permitted, meaning that sub-clauses were provided

by State and local governments to find ways out of upholding Federal laws. Finally, from the time of James Baldwin, ‘derogation’ of laws, or the removal of certain laws, was accomplished. Nevertheless, ‘abrogation,’ that is the destruction of ‘law’ and ‘justice’ persisted from the time of Jefferson through the time of Baldwin, and there is evidence that this continues today, all because of the subjectivity allowed into the legislation and judicial system.

Thomas Jefferson’s subjectivity of law was that he felt it necessary to allow government to decide through the voice of a democracy who was and who was not a ‘person.’ So, this continued injustices and slavery. James Baldwin’s subjectivity lied in his concept of ‘social justice,’ as that is by its very definition shaped by the situations and perceptions of a society. ‘Social justice’ is unbalanced and a perversion of ‘justice.’ Although Baldwin’s shared position with the Civil Rights Movement that public services should be shared equally among taxpaying citizens was a push for ‘justice,’ enforcing private businesses and people to provide equal services to Blacks was an attack against ‘justice’ through Affirmative Action. Baldwin’s concern was that the people behind the government system were immoral and that immorality was corrupting the system (Baldwin, 23, 47). I would suggest, then, that is evidence the system has too much subjective power, and the perfectibility of mankind through the coercion of the state is ignorant of empirical evidences contrary to that notion. To believe that it is

noble to pursue such a goal in the face of evidence and the very nature of mankind, is utopianistic and naïve at best.

My position against Affirmative Action is that it is an overreach of government into society. I am aware that this view is not popular and often attacked. As it was Affirmative Action that was implemented to attempt rectify past injustices against Blacks and people of color. It was sort of a ‘reparation’ from slavery through to inequalities of Baldwin’s time. Nonetheless, I see racism as being a moral issue, not a legal issue. I think racism is a natural evil and inclination of the ignorant person, and it takes place universally. By forcing people through the proverbial gun of the government to be ‘ethical,’ does not create ethical people. The Aristotelian approach here is that moral laws do not make moral people. In order for a person to make a moral decision, they must be free to do so. Simply being racist and not wishing to do business with someone is not a direct attack on someone, it is a personal choice of association and exchange. A free society allows for people to freely associate with whom they please; and in a free society there is a free market that would “correct itself,” like a democracy, in pursuit of the most dollars. A successful business would learn to accept any race, because if they do not their competition surely will.

So, as a clarification, I do think racism is immoral, and slavery is one of the worst things one can do to another. I do not think a ‘just’ government should be able to regulate immoral behaviors that are of the ‘negative liberty’ type- that is liberties that do not infringe on the rights of others. I do

think a ‘just’ government is required to prevent any ‘positive liberties’ which directly infringe on the rights of others. I also think government has the crucially imperative role of preventing and/or punishing those that harm others such as through acts of violence, theft, threats, death, and/or enslavement, etc. Furthermore, I do not think an entire race is to be condemned because of the actions of even a majority. Every action is performed by an individual as suggested by ‘praxeology’ or ‘methodological individualism,’ that is the study of the actions of individuals. Not all black people were enslaved, and not all white people were enslavers. Some people continue to push the notion that all white people in America are to be blamed even to this day when no legalized slavery in the U.S. exists; this is a symptom of what happened, or a ‘repercussion’ as it were. Perhaps, there is no way to escape the transgenerational trauma that many black people have from the horrific history of slavery. At least not until individuals, not acting in ‘collectivism,’ begin to stand up and make changes in their own lives in order to see the world for what it now is and what it can become. No matter the case of one’s ancestry, our individual thoughts and actions matter in the present, and we are each responsible for those.

From the establishment of slavery in the U.S. to the unwillingness to end it by Jefferson and others, the repercussions of such injustices were magnified the longer they took place. From Baldwin’s subjectivity of ‘social justice’ through the Civil Rights Movement and Affirmative Action, I can only imagine the continuation of injustices leading to furthering despotism

in the U.S. for years to come. I am ever grateful that we no longer have slavery in this nation, and I am happy to see racist laws no longer existing as far as I am aware. To Thomas Jefferson, I am thankful for our nation. To Frederick Douglass I am thankful for the inspiration to pursue ‘Liberty,’ ‘Justice,’ and ‘Freedom.’ To James Baldwin, I am thankful for his desire of integration and charisma for change.

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